

2nd Sunday in Advent

December 7, 2009

Isa. 40:1-11; 2 Pet. 3:8-15; Mark 1:1-8

Introduction. Mark's gospel doesn't begin with an angel whispering in Mary's ear. There are no shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. There are no big-eyed animals, standing around a humble manager. There are no wise men from the East following a star.

In fact... if Mark's gospel were the only one to be passed down to future generations, none of us ever would have seen a children's Christmas pageant, or one of the beautiful manger tableaux that are on display this time of year.

Nor does Mark have the poetic grandeur of St. John, whose gospel introduction is read on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Listen again to how Mark **does** introduce his account of Jesus' life: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

It may be helpful to remember that Mark is most likely the first of the gospels to be put together in written form. Mark either didn't know about the stories of Jesus' birth, or he didn't think they were especially relevant to his purpose in writing this gospel.

In Hebrew, Genesis chapter one reads: "In the beginning of God's creating the heavens and the earth..." Sounds very much like Mark's first verse, doesn't it? "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

As God once acted to create the universe, God now acts in Jesus Christ to **change** the world; and so, Mark introduces his account with words that confront the world of his day.

The word translated "good news" is *euangelion*, which comes into English as evangelical or evangelism. Our congregation is named Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church to declare that the gospel of Jesus Christ indeed is preached here.

Prior to the gospel writings, however, this was not specifically a religious term. In fact, it doesn't appear at all in Luke or John's gospel. It was, however, commonly used in reference to Augustus Caesar.

"Euangelion" described a new victory of Caesar's armies. Because Caesar also was thought to be a god, or a son of god, the Imperial propaganda machine claimed that **Caesar's** rule had changed the whole world and ushered in a new age of peace and prosperity.

In contrast to this **worldly** view, Mark declares that what is **truly** good news, what has **actually** changed the world... is Jesus Christ.

It's no accident that the "good tidings" from Isaiah that we heard in today's first reading, and that Mark alludes to at the beginning of his gospel, declare the same thing: It is not the power of Babylon, or of Persia, or of any other human empire, that shapes the world. It is the power and glory of God.

It is **God** who bulldozes the wilderness to make a highway for God's people to find salvation, for God's people to return home from their captivity.

After setting the stage with his brief and to-the-point introduction, Mark immediately directs our attention to the response demanded by such a world-changing event. "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

I've talked about repentance many times from this pulpit. In Hebrew the word means "to turn around," "to do an about face." In Greek it means to have a complete change of mind, or perhaps better, a change of heart.

Much like a sponsor at an AA meeting, Mark encourages you to take a hard look at your life. Are you headed in the wrong direction? Is it possible that the path you've been walking may not be the right path for you? Is there something wrong with your life, that by the grace of God, you can change? If so, you have to begin by admitting who and what you are: "Hi, I'm Paul; and I'm not the person God wants me to be."

Once you've admitted this to yourself, you are ready to hear the "good news" that Mark declares: **Jesus**... can turn you around!

I'm not talking about Jesus' simply making you a "better" person, someone who is nicer and more pleasant to be around. I'm talking about a total transformation... an extreme makeover.

Some years ago on Broadway I saw Mikhail Baryshnikov play the leading role in Franz Kafka's famous play "Metamorphosis." All the action takes place inside what looks like a child's jungle gym. He starts out as a fully human person; and gradually over the course of the next hour or so, he is transformed into an insect. Baryshnikov's flexibility and athletic skill were so effective, that by the end of the production, I swear... I thought he was a bug!

That's the kind of transformation that John preaches. That's the kind of turn around in your life that is made possible by the presence of Jesus Christ. That's the good news that Mark declares.

Think it's impossible. Think: "I know I'm not the person I could be, but I just don't know how to change. Well... remember Mark's message: "**Jesus...** can... and will... turn you around. It begins with your baptism. Notice... what John the Baptist proclaims is not repentance as such, but a **baptism** of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John the Baptist promises that "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me... I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

St. Paul explains to the Christians at Rome what this means for our life: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

"Walk in newness of life."

That's the turn around.

That's the transformation.

That's what Jesus can **do**... for you.

Conclusion. Kathleen Norris, in her book *Amazing Grace*, writes about repentance:

"We do not suddenly change who we are, magically becoming new people, with all our old faults left behind. What happens is more subtle. In the process of repentance, those sinful parts of our selves do not vanish... so much as become transformed.

We can't run from who we are, with our short tempers, our vanity, our sharp tongues, our pride, or our despair. But we can repent...we can repent in its root meaning of "turn around."We can face ourselves as we really are; and we can pray that God will take our faults and use them for the good."

As you leave here and return to the ministry of your daily life, ask yourself:

What would turning around look like for me?

How might the transformation that God promises be life-giving?

How can repentance help me prepare for Christ's coming?

Remember: Jesus coming is only the beginning of the good news.

Your part in the future of God... is yet to be completed.